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SUBJECT: RUSSIA POCKETS EU COUNCIL STATEMENT ON GEORGIA

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Russian officials and observers pocketed the September 1 EU statement as a mild rebuke for Russian aggression in Georgia, with Putin and Medvedev praising Europe's "reasonable approach." While Sarkozy reportedly delivered tough messages to Medvedev on September 3, EU commission officials predicted difficult negotiations and labelled the full withdrawal of Russian troops a likely "non-starter." Experts continue to downplay European leverage, noting Russia's "fatigue" over threats to suspend PCA negotiations and continued divisions within EU ranks. End summary.

GOR Praises EU's Balanced Approach

¶2. (SBU) Russia's ruling tandem pocketed the September 1 EU Council statement on Georgia, praising Europe's "realistic" approach to the conflict. In interviews on September 2, President Medvedev called the EU statements "reasonable" and likened the use of sanctions to a "double-edged sword" that did not represent the interests of Europe. He reiterated that most EU members wanted "constructive collaboration." While traveling in Uzbekistan, PM Putin echoed Medvedev's positive view that "common sense prevailed," expressing surprise that the EU denounced Russia's disproportionate response but had not commented on Georgia's aggression.

¶3. (SBU) The Foreign Ministry also conveyed an upbeat assessment of the EU session, noting that cooperation with the EU "should not be held hostage to the conflict over Georgia." Despite the efforts of "some countries" to introduce sanctions and condemn the Russian government, the MFA stressed "the majority of EU member-states have shown a responsible approach and have confirmed a course of partnership with Russia." Calling the suspension of PCA negotiations an "artificial obstacle," the MFA responded that it was used to the politicization of the negotiations. The MFA asserted that Russia had "strictly followed" the Six-Point Medvedev-Sarkozy Plan and welcomed the upcoming visit by President Sarkozy on September 8 to settle details of the plan.

Sarkozy Remains Firm

¶4. (C) French Ambassador de Laboulaye told the Ambassador that President Sarkozy would reinforce to Medvedev in a September 3 phone call that:

-- The EU is ready to carry on discussions with Russia as long as it pulled back forces from Georgian territory. Sarkozy would keep pushing on illegality of Russia's "occupation force;"

-- Russia needed to prevent ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia, given indications that the Abkhaz are planning raids in the Gali region; and

-- Actions to undermine the viability of Georgian state are unacceptable.

EC Mission Predicts a Bumpy Ride

¶5. (C) EU Commission officials here in Moscow foreshadowed difficulties in negotiations, terming the EU's demand for withdrawal "a non-starter." As they have noted to us in the past, the PCA is an insufficient carrot, given Russian confidence that economic interests in Europe will prevail and propel the resumption of negotiations. The EU Commission officials noted to us that Russia's September 1 announcement of a Russian military contribution to the European Force (EUFOR) mission in Chad and the Central African Republic served as a reminder to the EU of Russia's potential as a partner. The EU will now review whether or not to accept Russian military assistance to EUFOR.

Commentators Defend Kremlin

¶6. (C) Russian think-tankers have also downplayed the possibility of European pressure, with long-time EU-Russia advocate Nadezhda Arbatova of the Center for European Integration telling us that the EU's response to suspend the PCA negotiations was "fully predicted by the Kremlin." Russia had entered a period of "PCA fatigue," where arguments against Russia have become "ridiculous." She argued that "ultimately Europe will come to understand the error of recognizing Kosovo, and that Kosovo, South Ossetia, and

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Abkhazia are exceptions." The sooner Europe gets over this the better. Pro-Kremlin dailies trumpeted divisions, with the business-oriented Kommersant highlighting that "new Europe" stalwarts such as Poland and Lithuania had dropped their calls for sanctions before the summit.

BEYRLE